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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000498

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PROP](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRAN: THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, Iran Regional Presence
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: The IRIG has for some time considered Western media -- both press and entertainment -- as part of the "soft war" it claims is being waged against it. Despite these claims, and laws declaring satellite receivers illegal, the IRIG has tolerated a Western media presence in the country and has rarely moved seriously to stem the growing number of satellite receivers in the country. There are recent indications, however, that IRIG authorities are increasingly alarmed by the popularity of BBC Persian and two commercial, satellite broadcasters offering Farsi-language entertainment programming. Implicit in this alarm is a fear that state-controlled broadcaster IRIB is losing the battle for Iranian viewers. End summary

Fourth Estate/Fifth Column

12. (C) Iranian officials have complained of what they describe as "media terrorism," "press wars" and "cultural aggression" in depicting the Western press and entertainment industry as an element in the ongoing "soft war" against Iran. Following the presidential elections, the IRIG imposed further restrictions on Western journalists and news outlets in the country. According to our press contacts, obtaining an Iranian visa has become nearly impossible and they are subject to greater scrutiny by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. Many foreign news outlets have scaled back or ended their presence in the country for the security of their reporters.

13. (C) While those measures were intended by the IRIG to limit the news flowing out of Iran -- in the IRIG's eyes, stopping the distortion of Iran's policies and "falsehoods" about events in the country-- Iranian officials seem increasingly worried about the popularity of BBC Persian and two commercial, Farsi-language entertainment channels that are broadcasting into the country. In November 14 comments to a conference in Iran, IRIB Deputy Director Ali Darabi said that about 40 percent of Iranian households have satellite receivers, doubling in the past year, and that the trend was worrisome. According to press reports, Darabi said that satellite networks were an attempt by the "Global Arrogance" to undermine Iranian culture and weaken the nation, in recognition that it could not bring down the Islamic

Republic through military means. Darabi also implied that the IRIG had grudgingly accepted the prevalence of satellite receivers, saying that the law prohibited all but certain "elites" from having satellite dishes; therefore, 40 percent of Iranians were now members of the elite. (Note: According to IRPO media contacts and other sources, the percentage of Iranian households having satellite receivers may be as high as 65 percent.)

14. (C) Iranian officials have singled out BBC Persian for criticism as a propaganda outlet since the service began. In October, Iranian officials held a conference on the use of the foreign media in psychological warfare, with much of the conference devoted to BBC Persian and to a lesser extent VOA. With its staff drawn mainly from Iranian journalists who recently were living in Iran, and its high-quality production, BBC Persian has attracted an audience, especially following the election, at IRIB's expense. A BBC Persian contact told us it had not conducted extensive viewership surveys yet, but it had heard from its sources in Iran that IRIB was losing viewers, with the loss attributed to BBC Persian, VOA and a general boycott of the network after the presidential elections. There are some press reports that IRIB's viewership has declined by 40 percent since June. (Note: We have not seen any ratings data that would confirm those reports. Many of our Iranian contacts regularly note that BBC Persian is superior to VOA for its objectivity and its more professional production.)

Entertainment with Malign Intent

15. (C) Farsil, a joint venture between News Corporation and

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Afghanistan's Moby Media, began broadcasting entertainment, including many US and other Western programs dubbed into Farsi, into Iran in August. Similarly, MBC Persian, which started in 2008, broadcasts Western movies with Persian subtitles into Iran. Contacts at both channels have told us they are very pleased with the channels' ratings. Farsil executives contended it had already become the number 1 foreign-based channel in Iran, and believe their viewers were coming primarily from IRIB. The IRIG was sufficiently worried by their programming, which includes Latin American and Korean serials in addition to American shows and movies, that it was attempting to jam their broadcasts using microwave jammers around Tehran. The IRIG also made it illegal to provide dubbing for broadcasters outside Iran in an attempt to deprive Farsil of the talent needed to produce its Farsi voiceovers.

16. (C) Farsil executives and other IRPO contacts, while noting the availability of BBC Persian and other news via satellite, said most Iranians wanted entertainment and this -- plus the availability of cheap satellite dishes in Iran -- was driving satellite penetration and the departure of IRIB's audience. Farsil contacts said its audience spiked during Ramadan, when Iranians tend to watch more television.

17. (C) IRIB's response has been to try to increase the quantity and quality of its entertainment to counter this competition for the eyes and ears of the Iranian public, and press reports indicated it may add dedicated sports, childrens, and film channels at a cost of several hundred million dollars added to IRIB's estimated USD 800 million budget. Iranian officials have criticized IRIB's performance in countering this "threat"

thus far. For example, former Majlis Speaker Gholam Haddad Adel told the October conference on foreign media as psychological warfare that BBC Persian had done a better job covering celebrations of the Iranian New Year than IRIB earlier this year, and if that were the case, "then we have lost the war."

Comment

18. (C) Although, IRIB remains the leading network in Iran and the primary source of news and entertainment for most Iranians, Iranian officials are obviously wary of the growing influence of well-produced, Farsi-language satellite broadcasts from abroad in what they perceive as war by other means. The availability of alternative entertainment and news programs at a time of open opposition to the government, and by extension the state broadcaster, has no doubt further exacerbated the IRIG's concerns over the influx of "foreign" ideas and fears of "soft overthrow." The pointed criticism of IRIB that has followed suggests that some IRIG officials believe that IRIB's management is failing to counter these threats, although the Supreme Leader recently re-appointed IRIB Director Ezzatollah Zarghami for another five-year term. Despite the IRIG's concerns that these broadcasts are meant to turn Iranians against their government, we believe that most Iranians are simply looking for entertainment, and to a lesser degree objective reporting, they can't get at home in switching the channel to BBC Persian, Farsil or MBC Persian.

EYRE